

*Under the Feet of Jesus*  
(Plume edition)  
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*Viramontes*

**Chapter 2, pgs. 57-58**

The honking signaled the return of the trucks and the piscadores gathered their tools and jugs and aches and bags and children and pouches and emerged from the fields, a patch quilt of people charred by the sun: brittle women with bandannas over their noses, their salt-and-pepper hair dusted brown; young teens rinsing their faces and running wet fingers through their hair; children, bored, tired, and antsy; and men so old they were thought to be dead when they slept. All emerged from the silence of the fields with sighs and mutters and, every now and then, laughter. A mother fingered a kerchief and poked the horns in her son's ear, while another teased the chin of her baby. The piscadores slapped themselves to chase away the dust of the day while children proudly hooked the necks of their fathers. A teenage girl playfully pounced on the shoulders of her boyfriend and laughed.

The Foreman produced a table of tables and columns of numbers, scribbled rows completed, names, erased calculations while the piscadores climbed the flatbed trucks. Gumecindo stood on top offering a hand to pull a piscador up. Alejo shoved his cap in his back pocket, fixed his hair in the side view mirror of the truck. He waited near the read bumper to lift a child up by the waist to the



outstretched arms of a mother.

Alejo sought Estrella. The trucks followed the railroad tracks which passed the orchards and

fields, rumbled and rocked and jerked to a stop whenever someone knocked on the rear window.

Before the last truck departed, Alejo's glance finally fell upon her. He watched her stooped body step on the ties of the railroad track as if she were cautiously climbing a ladder.

**Chapter 2, pg. 72**

White butterflies and golden wasps and green and brown lace flies swooped and hovered before her as she trudged across brittle thistles to meet Perfecto. Her shoes were caked with mud and laced above her trousers dusty from a full day's work. Estrella wiped her forehead with the back of a sleeve. The late afternoon skies sheened a hubcap silver over the barn, and the orchards, and a flock of ducks flew above her like an arrowhead, their beaks and necks dipping in flight. Her body slouched, and when she remembered, or when she saw her own shadow against the tall grasses, she straightened her shoulders and pushed her chest out. A few stray ducks pumped their wings.

**Chapter 2, pgs. 76-78**

Alejo slid through the bushy branches, the tangled twigs scratching his face, and he was ready to jump when

he felt the mist. He shut his eyes tight to the mist of black afternoon. At first it was just a slight moisture until the poison rolled down his face in deep sticky streaks. The lingering smell was a scent of ocean salt and beached kelp until he inhaled again and could detect under the innocence the heavy chemical choke of poison. Air clogged in his lungs and he thought he was just holding his breath, until he tried exhaling but couldn't, which meant he couldn't breathe. He panicked when he realized he was choking, clamped his neck with one hand, feeling his Adam's apple against his palm, but still held onto a branch tightly with the other, afraid he would fall long and hard, like the insects did. He swallowed finally and the spit in his throat felt like balls of scratchy sand. Was this punishment for his thievery? He was sorry, Lord, so sorry.

Alejo's head spun and he shut his stinging eyes tighter to regain balance. But a hole ripped in his stomach like a match to paper, spreading into a deeper and bigger black hole that wanted to swallow him completely. He knew he would vomit. His clothes were dampened through, then the sheet of his skin absorbed the chemical and his whole body began to cramp from the shrinking pull of his skin squeezing against his bones.

He wheezed and almost fell, and if it wasn't for the fact that he was determined not to fall, he would have tumbled like the ripe peaches hitting the ground with a hard thud. His body swung forward and he caught himself by hitching on to a branch and he scratched his face against a mesh of leaves. As the rotary motor of the biplane approached again, he closed his eyes and imagined sinking into the tar pits.

He thought first of his feet

sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air. Black bubbles erasing him. Finally his eyes. Blankness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone. And when he awoke from the darkness of the tar, he was looking up into the canopy of peach trees, his forehead a swamp of purple blood and bruise and hair, and into the face of his cousin.

### **Chapter 2, pg. 83**

Perfecto lived a travesty of laws. He knew nothing of their source but it seemed his very existence contradicted the laws of others, so that everything he did like eat and sleep and work and love was prohibited. He didn't want to waste what little time he had left. With or without Estrella's help, he committed himself to tearing the barn down. The money was essential to get home before home became so distant, he wouldn't be able to remember his way back.

He narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun. Feeling an unspeakable sadness, he sat under the vines for relief and he could hear his heart pumping in his ears. He staked the soil between his workshoes with his knife again and again. The soil dulled the sharpness of his blade as it did his own life.

### **Chapter 3, pg. 108**

Petra did not allow the children inside. The proprietor squinted whenever children flooded the store as if their touches dulled the value of his wares. And there were too many things

to touch: pots and brooms and a barrel of pinto beans and tacked up posters of celebrities; slabs of fabric on the shelves and stacks of pirated cassette tapes. Cantinflas plaster of paris statues and canned goods and candles and propane lined up like soldiers. Too, the peppermint sticks were right at the children's eye level. This inspired such outlandish behavior that it made Petra spank them with a fierce, unjustified anger she later repented. A string of Christmas bells hung on the screen door with a rusty thumb tack though summer was here and the bells jingled as Petra pulled the door open.

### **Chapter 3, pgs. 119-120**

When it perched on the branch to rest, the crow eyed the woman's head near the smoking fire. The wind disturbed the branch under its claws and the bird glided downward. It pecked on the stable ground not far from the smoke.

Three fingers of Clabber Girl baking powder, sprinkle of salt (a little salt over the left shoulder for luck), a few handfuls of La Pina flour, Rex lard, and warm water from the aluminum coffeepot.

Knead. Let the white mound stand with a dishcloth over it. Boil. Put the coffee grinds in the pot. Sauté the papas with diced onion and tomato and lard. Remove the dishcloth, begin rolling the tortillas.

Petra stopped to look at the bird which pumped its wide wings upward, a twig in its beak. The smell of the woodsmoke brought Petra back to her place and she took another small mound of kneaded dough, dusted it with flour and began to roll it on an oval cutting board. She did this like awakening without a clock, like taking a drink when she was thirsty, sometimes singing under her breath, sometimes thinking about too many things at once.

Starting in the middle, she rolled from north to south, flipped the dough, sprinkled flour, turned to remove the tortilla already baking on the comal, returned to roll from east to west until the tortilla was perfectly round, then place in on the comal, get more dough, sprinkled flour, turned to remove the baked tortilla from the comal and stack it on top of the others. Spoon the potatoes in the flour tortilla so nothing would spill. Fold the bottom of the tortilla, then the top, then the sides so that the burrito was a perfect envelope, then rewrap the burritos in foil for the lunches. She could do this in the dark, ill or healthy, near some trees, by a road, on a door made into a table or while birds flew past her with twigs between their beaks because tortillas filled her children's stomachs and made their stomachs hungry for more.

### **Chapter 4, pgs. 133-134**

The white trailer stuck out like a partially buried bone in the middle of the vacant plot. The compact square windows facing the highway had foil taped to the framed sliding glass which deflected the sun. A small porch awning was held up by two hollow poles planted solidly in Folgers coffee cans filled with dried cement. Perfecto turned into the graveled drive. The gravel crushed and spit and the muffler trembled and Estrella leaned forward from the backseat, her head between the mother and Perfecto Flores to see the gas gauge bury the E, and Perfecto flicked a fingernail a few times to make sure the gage wasn't stuck. Perfecto parked between an orange and white ambulance, its rusty chassis propped up with mason bricks and a black Rambler with a white top. The tires of the ambulance were missing and Estrella sat back to think.

The station wagon knocked and pinged ever after Perfecto removed the key from the ignition.

He sat quietly in the front of the white trailer, as if the mud and the tire and Alejo and Petra had squeezed his heart out and his tired bones wanted to sit behind the steering wheel for a moment, real quiet. He rubbed his eyes under his bifocals, waited for someone to do something. He had done his part. He got them there. The heat in the car immediately began to rise.

#### **Chapter 4, pgs. 141-142**

Petra did not like all this jotting and poking the nurse was doing. She had smelled the carnations even before the nurse appeared and the smell repulsed her and she fought against upchucking right there into the shiny trash barrel. The nurse should know better than to wear something so venomous to pregnant women as carnations. Even the many things on the nurse's desk implied fakery; the pictures of her smiling boys (Who did they think they were, smiling so boldly at the camera?), the porcelain statue of a calico kitten with a red stethoscope, wearing a folded white cap with a red cross between its too cute perky little ears; a plie of manila folder files stacked in a strange way that seemed cluttered and disordered. She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton. She may fool other people but certainly not her. Enough. Get the young man well enough so that he could return to Edinburg. As she saw Estrella touch Alejo's cheek, she wondered for the first time about contagious ailments.

—Don't you worry, she'll be behind this curtain, just keeping us company. Estrella heard the

Velcro rip of the blood pressure wrap, the rattle of shower curtain rings when the nurse pulled the curtain between she and Alejo.

—How much is all this gonna cost? Asked Petra, spitting into the trash can, but no one answered.

#### **Chapter 4, pgs. 148-150**

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her.

—Maybe, Estrella asked again, but this time the nurse didn't even look up as she filed the folder away. Estrella walked out the door and out to the car. She didn't know what she was about to do, but had to do something to get the money for the gas for the hospital for Alejo. The doors of the wagon were unlocked and the twins, and Ricky and Arnulfo were playing under the shade of the oak tree, making circles with pebbles they had collected. They looked up only for a moment as Estrella opened the back door, pulled open the hidden trunk door, grabbed the crowbar which laid next to the red jack, heavy, iron, cold, and walked back to the clinic. Perfecto was already walking out with Alejo, the mother behind him, but they froze as she approached. They moved aside to let Estrella pass, then U-turned and followed her. Perfecto laid Alejo on the vacant chairs.

When she reentered the clinic, the fan was off and the air was still and as thick as muck against her body. There was no turning back. But Estrella moved forward at the desk, the crowbar locked in her two fists.

—Give us back our money. Her heart dripped sweat. She felt the sweat puddle and dampen the soles of her feet. When the nurse looked up, it was only then that Estrella noticed how perfect her lipstick was.

—What are you talking about? The nurse, who now held her black patent leather purse, clutched it tighter to her breasts.

—Give us back our money.

—Excuse me?

Perfecto moved forward to grab the crowbar, but Petra held him back.

—I'll smash these windows first, then all these glass jars if you don't give us back our money.

—You listen here!

Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with the nurse's cap into pieces. The nurse dropped her purse, shielded her face with her hands. Estrella waited. The nurse began to cry but still had not moved. Estrella knocked the folders which spread like cards on the floor. A lid fell and circled on the floor until it rounded to a complete stop. Estrella held out her hand, palm up.

The nurse stepped forward gingerly, and removed the tin box from the top drawer of the desk. She tried three different keys before one slipped into the small lock and unlocked the box and spilled coins and dollars on the desk and backed away. Estrella counted nine dollars and seven cents.

She lowered the crowbar, unable to catch a breath and showed the nurse what she had taken. She did not feel like herself holding the money. She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money. The money felt wet and ugly and sweaty like the swamp between her legs.

—You should have let Perfecto fix the toilet, she whispered. But it was then that Estrella realized the nurse was sobbing into her hands, her lipstick smeared as if she tried wiping her mouth away. She saw the nurse trembling before her.

### **Chapter 5, pgs. 162-163**

He looked upon the moon's roundness like a quarter, bright as a new dime. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Perhaps the nurse simply reapplied her blood-red lipstick, then drove off just in time to pick up her sons and her sons were probably asleep in their beds right now. Perhaps the nurse was stirring cream into her decaffeinated coffee, the spoon clinking on the cup while her husband watched the late night news. "You won't believe what happened to me today...," she would probably say to him while he lay on the couch, because that is how Perfecto imagined people who had couches and living rooms and television set and who drank coffee even at night.

Perfecto wanted to load up his tools, a few blankets, some peaches. He couldn't tell whether it was love or simply fear that held him back. His arms folded tighter across his chest, and he dug his hands deeper into his armpits so that they wouldn't begin to pack even before his decision was final. He could

not wait for the barn and the money and tomorrow. If he left right this minute, without even turning back, pulled the arrow of pain from his belly, he would have a second chance. With four dollars to his name, a chestful of tools, some gasoline, and this old station wagon with a battery ready to die, he couldn't afford time.

Think. Think. Think, Perfecto you cabeza de burro chingado. The car had cooled and no longer warmed his back and he felt his skin goosebump. He had quit smoking in another life, when his hair was full and black and his children looked upon him as a man who could fix the axles of the world if he wanted to. He looked down at the loose swaying maggots. Perfecto was glad to have given up tobacco. He would have foolishly spent the last few dollars on a package of cigarettes, his desire was such, so over whelming.

### **Chapter 5, pgs. 175-176**

She was stunned by the diamonds. The sparkle of stars cut the night—almost violently sharp. Estrella braced her fingers over the rim of the door frame, then heaved herself up into the panorama of the skies as if she were climbing out of a box. The birds pumped their wings in the skies furiously like debris whirling in a tornado, and it amazed her that they never once collided with one another. Over the eucalyptus and behind the moon, the stars like silver pomegranates glimmered before an infinity of darkness. No wonder the angels had picked a place like this to exist.

The roof tilted downward and she felt gravity pulling her but did not lose her footing. The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus,

and a few pieces tumbled down and over the edge of the barn. No longer did she feel her blouse damp with sweat. Not longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart. Her feet brushed close to the edge of the roof and it was there that she stopped. A breeze fluttered a few loose strands of hair on her face and nothing had ever seemed as pleasing to her as this. Some of the birds began descending, cautiously at first, then in groups, and finally a few swallows flapped to their nests not far from where she stood. Estrella remained immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed.